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"Coercive Diplomacy" in the Light of Vietnam:  
Some Preliminary Notes

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"Coercive Diplomacy" in the Light of Vietnam: Some Preliminary Notes

In 1964, North Vietnam was guiding and supporting the VC insurgency in South Vietnam in a number of ways corresponding exactly to the forms of U.S. involvement in the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion ("Cuba I," in bureaucratic argot). In order to compel North Vietnam to "stop doing what she was doing" and "to leave her neighbors alone," the U.S. Government launched a series of "pressures" in what some officials may have regarded as the pattern of successful coercion in the 1962 Missile Crisis, "Cuba II." It failed.

Meanwhile, in part stimulated by such confrontations as the Berlin Crisis of 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis, a literature was appearing by such strategic analysts as Thomas Schelling and Herman Kahn on "crisis management" and the use of demonstrative force and threats of "escalation" to support "coercive diplomacy."<sup>1</sup> Both the form and apparent aims of the process of threatening and then bombing North Vietnam from the early spring of 1964, through the late spring of 1965 appeared so closely similar to the analytical models of these theorists--as they were quick to recognize, with the

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, "Escalation and its Strategic Context" by Herman Kahn, in National Security: Political, Military and Economic Strategies in the Decade Ahead (New York, 1963); Herman Kahn, On Escalation (New York, 1965); Thomas C. Schelling, Arms and Influence (New Haven, 1966). (Most of Schelling's book had appeared earlier, and for its theoretical framework it drew heavily upon his pathbreaking work in bargaining theory, The Strategy of Conflict (Cambridge, 1960) ).

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Tonkin Gulf reprisals drawing unenthusiastically approval from Schelling<sup>1</sup>--that some have conjectured a conscious application of their formal strategies by policy-makers.

That genesis seems highly unlikely. The bureaucratic roots of the coercive policy go back at least to 1961, when it was proposed on a contingent basis by Maxwell Taylor and Walt Rostow, both influential proponents in the 1964-65 period. What seems more plausible is that such writers as Schelling and Kahn were expressing analytically in the '60's premises and orientations that were widely shared in the official, semi-official and academic circles in which they moved. They drew, in general and abstract form, tactical conclusions, specific instances of which were quite likely to be invented independently by officials confronting particular conflict situations of that period.

However, the correspondence in principle seems valid. Thus, the trial of the coercive tactics in the case of North Vietnam seems a fair

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<sup>1</sup>"If the American military action was widely judged unusually fitting, this was an almost aesthetic judgment. If words like "repartee" can be applied to war and diplomacy, the military action was an expressive bit of repartee. It took mainly the form of deeds, not words, but the deeds were articulate...that night's diplomacy was carried out principally by pilots, not speechwriters." (Schelling, Arms and Influence, p. 142.)

Kahn's book, appearing too soon after the event to incorporate more than brief comments on the reprisal (On Escalation, pp. 54, 261) is more reserved, if not grudging: "I fear, though, that the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and the recent crisis in the Bay of Tonkin in the summer of 1964 may have given some government policy-makers and their staffs a greater sense of skill and capability in command and control than is completely justified, even if some feeling of increased "technical" competence is not completely misleading" (p. 256).



test of the theory, as of the actual preconceptions of officials. What is to be learned from this experience of failure, contrasting with the earlier success?

It appears that some of the limitations and unrealities of the models, when reexamined in the light of the Vietnam experience, do seem to have characterized the thinking of policy-makers, in ways that help explain why a policy that should have been seen as highly unpromising was adopted and why it did fail. On the other hand, some realistic complications ignored in the abstract analyses were, in fact, well appreciated by officials. (This is another reason for doubting any blind application of the theories). A number of these neglected complexities seem so critical, both to official thinking and to actual events, as to make the relevance of the existing analytical work to other actual crises both limited and suspect: even for analysing the perspectives and choices of actual decision-makers, let alone for prescribing "optimal" behavior or predicting the likely course of events.

The suggestion that, for certain key policy-makers, the intellectual framework of the approach against North Vietnam was "born of the Cuban missile crisis," is Henry Brandon's.

That brilliant success in averting thermonuclear war by the application of the coolest of cool rationalism--the "graduated response"--provided one of the new wisdoms of the nuclear age. President Kennedy, after weighing all the odds and 'trying to understand the implications of every move,' rejected the direct and immediate use of force. He decided in favor of a slow crescendo of military measures that avoided direct confrontation and immediated retaliation,



but clearly pointed at the possible and likely consequences if the graduated response was allowed to reach its climax.

...John Kennedy, his brother Robert, McGeorge Bundy, and Robert McNamara were the architects of this flexible strategy and the true believers in the intellectual process and its rational products. Robert Kennedy's history of the Cuban missile crisis is the textbook to the graduated response, and convincingly proves its validity. It therefore became the answer to containing the risks of direct nuclear confrontation that threaten every time a superpower is involved in war or a warlike situation. It succeeded in Cuba against the Soviet Union: logic suggested that it ought also to be effective--or more so, since it had to deal with actual conflict--against a small country such as North Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

Of the four "architects" mentioned, Bundy and McNamara were still predominant among Presidential advisors in 1964-65. And both were, indeed, ardent advocates of the "graduated" bombing policy actually adopted in the spring of 1965. (Likewise, Dean Rusk; and Walt W. Rostow, articulate though offstage in both crises).

Yet, as one who myself participated in and later studied both the Cuban Missile Crisis and the 1964-65 escalation process in Vietnam, I had never been specially struck by the similarities in the two approaches, as opposed to some major differences. After all, the one case amounted to an elaborate threat-process, leading up to an explicit (private) ultimatum promising decisive, though both limited and risky, action if U.S. terms, embodying significant concessions, were not

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<sup>1</sup>Henry Brandon, The Anatomy of Error (Boston, 1969), pp. 155-56.

met.<sup>1</sup> It was, as it was designed and hoped to be, successful before it ever became violent. The other was conceived from the beginning essentially as a program of violent, if demonstrative, pressures. This was, as planned, preceded by non-violent signals, but with no expectations that these alone could be effective.

Given the many other differences as well, could it really be that Cuba II was a critical influence on the thinking of, say, McNamara and Bundy in the later Vietnam crisis? On the first reading Brandon's comments recently, I doubted it. But on referring to the "textbook" cited by Brandon, I find the evidence powerfully suggestive.

In Robert Kennedy's account of "the thirteen days" in 1962, the President

knew he would have to act. ...What that action would be was still to be determined. But he was convinced from the beginning that he would have to do something...Secretary McNamara, by Wednesday, became the blockade's strongest advocate. He argued that it was limited pressure, which could be increased as the circumstances warranted. Further, it was dramatic and forceful pressure, which would be understood yet, most importantly, still leave us in control of events."<sup>2</sup>

The similarity is unmistakable to the arguments in late 1964 for what John T. McNaughton labelled the policy of "progressive squeeze-and -talk," in contrast to the JCS-preferred alternative he termed

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<sup>1</sup>Both the ultimatum and the concession--informing Khrushchev privately that U.S. IRBMs in Turkey would be removed "within a short time after this crisis was over"--were matters of the highest degree of secrecy within the U.S. Government, guessed-at but not revealed until Robert Kennedy's memoir, Thirteen Days (New York, 1969): pp. 106-109. To make the threat acceptable, of course, Kennedy denied to Dobrynin that it was an "ultimatum"; to make the offer giveable, he denied that it was a "quid pro quo."

<sup>2</sup>Robert F. Kennedy, Thirteen Days (New York, 1969), pp. 33-34.

"full/fast squeeze." \*Moreover, not only is the chosen(former) approach similar, as perceived by its proponents, but the whole set of options and arguments correspond in the two cases.

In both crises the JCS favored a large-scale, comprehensive initial attack: in the Cuban case, "five hundred sorties, striking all military targets, including the missile sites, airfields, ports and gun emplacements"; in the case of North Vietnam, a "sharp sudden blow," including Haiphong and Phuoc Yen, an airfield near Hanoi, in initial attacks.

In both cases, the JCS "forcefully presented their view that"[flexible alternatives] would not be effective." In the earlier case, they had a powerful civilian ally: Dean Acheson, who argued in a "clear and brilliant way" that "an air attack and invasion represented our only alternative."<sup>1</sup> More recently, Acheson has confirmed this description of his views, reporting without apparent embarrassment or change of heart his conviction at that time that the air attack was "the necessary and only effective

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<sup>1</sup>Op. cit., pp. 36, 38. Italics added.

\*This option was described as : "Present policies plus an orchestration of communications with Hanoi and a crescendo of additional military moves ...The scenario would be designed to give the U.S. the option at any point to proceed or not, to escalate or not, and to quicken the pace or not."



method of achieving our purpose."<sup>1</sup> (*Italics added*)

That this judgment was flatly mistaken is indicated rather backhandedly at the end of his account: "The amazing result was that by the very next morning this hundred-to-one shot certainly appeared to be paying off."<sup>2</sup>

All this may well have made its own impression on certain participants. Kennedy admits that it had been "with some trepidation" that he

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<sup>1</sup>Dean Acheson, "Dean Acheson's Version of Robert Kennedy's Version of the Cuba Missile Affair," *Esquire*, February, 1969, p. 76. Acheson stresses that his own preferred choice was: "simultaneous low-level bombing attacks on the nuclear installations." But this notion was a non-starter. As Acheson puts it, "the narrow and specific proposal...constantly became obscured and complicated by trimmings added by the military." According to Kennedy, McNamara reported to the ExCom that Acheson's proposal, "a surgical air strike, as it came to be called--was militarily impractical in the view of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that any such military action would have to include all military installations in Cuba, eventually leading to an invasion." (*Ibid.*, p. 34). This position was predictable, and effectively ruled out Acheson's scheme; and Acheson seems clearly to have preferred even the JCS version to the blockade.

Experience both in Cuba and later in North Vietnam suggests that the JCS may have had a better grasp of the reliability and limits of one-slice aerial "surgery" than did Acheson. When USAF pilots, after years of training for nuclear war in planes designed for that alone, finally were unleashed to drop high explosives on North Vietnam in February, 1965, their first few missions produced such low estimates of target damage that McNamara directed that these results be deleted from public reports. As for Cuba, we counted about one-third more missiles being transported away from Cuba after the crisis than any form of reconnaissance or intelligence had ever spotted, earlier, on the island; so even accurate bombing on a single strike--or for that matter, repeated strikes--would have failed to be as "decisive" as Acheson fantasied.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 46.

had brought himself to argue against Acheson, of whom he was "a great admirer"; listening to him on the Berlin crisis a year earlier, "I had thought to myself that I had never heard anyone so lucid and convincing and would never wish to be on the other side of an argument with him."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, "I supported McNamara's position in favor of a blockade. This was not from a deep conviction that it would be a successful course of action, but a feeling that it had more flexibility and fewer liabilities than a military attack."<sup>2</sup>

Despite success of this alternative to the "necessary and only effective" course, Acheson apparently still sees no reason to reevaluate his original judgment of "hundred-to-one" odds against; the President, he concludes, had been "phenomenally lucky." But for others, the crisis was surely a test not only of the chosen course of action but of the credibility of arguments that it could not work. This may well have been remembered two years later, when the JCS were again pressing the necessity of all-out, fast-paced bombing, and intelligence analyses (while not quoting 100-to-1 against the more deliberate, "limited, flexible" program adopted) held out little promise that anything less would decisively influence of the North Vietnamese leadership.

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<sup>1</sup>Kennedy, op. cit., p. 38

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 37

If so, the hopeful inference was mistaken, the memory a trap; a tragic one, for Vietnamese even more than for Americans. For this "controlled, graduated" coercive strategy was a hundred-to-one shot.

To be sure, there are those (like McGeorge Bundy) who point out that coercion of the Hanoi leadership was not all that was intended from the bombing program, or even, from the point of view of certain participants, the main objective. Yet the probable failure, and its consequences for later escalation and failure, of the coercive aim was certain to outweigh any imaginable side-benefits; whether from temporarily reassuring and "stabilizing" the Saigon regime<sup>1</sup> to proving to allies and domestic critics that we would, as one official once put it, "walk the last mile for a friend."

Nothing that has happened has suggested that the approach advocated by the JCS would have worked any better, or been anything but an unprecedented disaster, in either case. Yet warning might have been taken from the reasons for the fact, recognized by all, that verbal and non-violent demonstrative action alone--effective in the case of Cuba II--would not be adequate to get North Vietnam to meet our demands. The same factors that made non-violent pressures inadequate and violent ones look "necessary" in the 1964-65 situation would operate: (1) to keep those violent

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<sup>1</sup>Which was, in fact, overtutned by a half-abortive coup within two weeks of the Pleiku "retaliation," and whose civilian facade was finally discarded by the ARVN leadership in June, 1965. To be reminded now of the "success" of the three-year bombing of North Vietnam--or even the first month of it--in terms of such modest, supposedly reasonable purposes is like being told by a major arsonist that his "true primary aim" was to toast marshmallows (he has the sticky fingers, he assures us, if not the marshmallows, to show he succeeded).



measures limited and ambiguous, (2) thus to make them "insufficient," while encouraging still stronger demands, and (3) to make stronger attacks, as well, inadequate.

Why was it, after all, that the contemplated "crescendo of military measures"<sup>1</sup> could comprise no more than words and maneuvers in the one case, yet be effective against the world's most powerful opponent; where in the other, pitting the U.S.A. against one of the world's smaller agricultural countries, it was expected, correctly, that nothing less than "messages" delivered by bomber pilots would do, and even they would probably fail?

The answers had to do with differences between the two cases in: (1) the U.S. demand, as weighed by the opponent; (2) the importance of the stakes as seen by the U.S. public (and allies); (3) the means available to enforce the demand, and the relative effectiveness, costs (as affected by the opponent) and legitimacy (as seen by the U.S. public).

These differences in turn affected: (a) how sure the North Vietnamese leaders had to be that the U.S. would carry out its ultimate threats, before they would consider yielding to our demands; (b) how credible, over time, the U.S. was in fact able to make these threats, even with

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<sup>1</sup>A phrase used by Brandon in 1969 to describe the Cuba II strategy, and used by John McNaughton in 1964 to characterize "progressive squeeze-and-talk" option against North Vietnam.

the use of limited "demonstrations."<sup>1</sup> But differences that led to different ~~perceptions~~ led, as well, to differences in effect and prospects for success.

In both cases, the "crescendo" was designed, at least in part, to compel an adversary to withdraw certain recently infiltrated items: missiles in the one case, cadres, "regroupees" and units in the other.

In the case of Cuba II:

1. The items to be removed could be seen by Americans as direct threats to their lives; as immediately and insignificantly shifting the strategic balance of power; and as likely to influence, decisively and soon, the course of the Berlin Crisis, threatening nuclear war and/or the cohesion of the Western alliance.<sup>2</sup>
2. The extreme secrecy, public deception and direct high level lies of the Soviets supported the most ominous interpretations of their move;

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<sup>1</sup>See D. Ellsberg, "The Theory and Practice of Blackmail," P-3883, the RAND Corporation, July 1968 (originally delivered as a Lowell Lecture, Boston, March, 1959). In the technical terms of that analysis of coercion, factor (a) above would be described as North Vietnam's "critical risk," facing the specific U.S. threats and demands, and factor (b) North Vietnam's actual or perceived risk. The U.S. "problem," as coercer, was to make (b) greater than (a), by actions that affected one or both. But compared to the adversary's position in Cuba II, (a) looked much higher for North Vietnam, (b) much lower, and the U.S. ability to affect either, very small.

<sup>2</sup>The first two of these perceptions were highly questionable--indubitable though they seemed to Acheson--and might have been widely questioned if the crisis had lasted much longer; but they were plausible first impressions, certain to be politically dominant for two weeks or more.

at the same time they indicated a "bad conscience" and provided a political vulnerability.

3. The items were in an area where, virtually all Americans agreed, the opponents "had no business" and their very presence was directly challenging, whereas we had the tradition, supposed "right," and strategic necessity of intervening there.

4. The first violent U.S. move in Cuba (unless--as briefly considered--it were against the SAMs alone) would<sup>1</sup> decisively and quickly destroy the offending items. (Thus, unless they were removed first under threat, they could quickly be removed by force; and this by limited means that, at worst, would not destroy the surrounding society).

5. Neither officials nor public in America doubted that the items were wholly controlled and could be removed by the opposing leadership: i.e., that our demand could be met.

6. The stakes appeared less than vital for the opponents--i.e. they could comply without sacrificing the survival of their regime or society--and smaller than they were for us.<sup>2</sup>

7. Although the specific move had been a surprise, the opposing officials

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<sup>1</sup>It was believed (but see earlier footnote).

<sup>2</sup>Though the retreat may have contributed to the downfall of Krushchev himself. Many of our officials perceived the relative stakes similarly in the case of North Vietnam. They were mistaken.



were known relatively well, and regular, relatively trusted channels of diplomatic communication existed between the heads of state.

Given some of the factors above, within a few days of the opening of the crisis, both NATO and OAS allies had indicated sympathetic support, and (by OAS action) U.S. intervention had been given the color of international legitimacy.

Moreover, in the course of the week following the President's speech, there was ample demonstration of support for the President's purposes--even to the extent of accepting considerable risks, or pressing him to go further--among Congress, press and public. Indeed, the reaction of Congressional leaders to the President's revelations just before his speech was unsettling to Kennedy in its "emotional criticism" of his moderate initial steps; even Senator Fulbright "strongly advised military action rather than such a weak step as the blockade."<sup>1</sup> But though the President was "upset" by the meeting, which his brother perceived as "a tremendous strain" on him, this congressional mood--made publicly evident in the course of the week--was, of course, a source of immense strength in the coercive bargaining of the final day of the crisis. The unexpectedly widespread and firm support for the President's leadership in the crisis, at home and abroad, presented the Soviets with little opportunity or temptation to make counterthreats.

None of this could have been foreseen with certainty. The support

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<sup>1</sup>Kennedy, op. cit., p. 54.

might not have been there. To this extent Acheson's worries were reasonable; the decisive moves he wanted might have been forestalled, politically, in the course of the week.<sup>1</sup> Yet if that had happened, it would have exposed public and allied attitudes that should raise questions about the fitness of the President's carrying out such an action at all. If the public, or Congress, (or allies) did not, in fact, agree that the risks for all were worth taking, should the President trust his own judgment to the extent of imposing such risks upon them? Did he have the right? The question does not answer itself; but to say the least, the burden of proof would be upon him, and upon the advocates of such a course, to justify it. Moreover, it would be far less prudent than otherwise to proceed, for in the event of initial failure, his early, reluctant support would surely fade quickly; which is to say that failure would be likely, since it would pay his opponent to hold out till this happened.

In the event, Kennedy's ultimatum, delivered on Saturday night through Robert Kennedy to Dobrynin, carried the utmost weight of credibility, far more than it could have conveyed a week earlier. Though none of the "crescendo of military measures" during the week had, short of the ultimatum, slowed the Russian installations of the missiles, they joined with the indications of political support to make that final warning maximally believable.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Acheson emphasizes the coming to operational status of the missiles as imposing the time urgency; but this in itself did not call for a fait accompli, either when the bases were discovered or a week later. Given Acheson's confidence in "reasonable" Soviet responses to military action, it is not clear why this should have made so much difference anyway. Obviously, Acheson was concerned about queasiness in the masses, if not in the President himself, especially after the missiles approached readiness.

<sup>2</sup>The shooting-down of a U-2 on Saturday morning added a crucial element of Schelling's "threat that leaves something to chance," in a way that has not yet been fully revealed. But that is another story.



Whatever the realistic odds on the success of a process of "pressures" and threat at the start of the week, they were vastly higher by week's end.

This is not to say that the remaining risks of the commitment process in Cuba II were prudent or worth taking.<sup>1</sup> Ted Sorensen notes at the end of Robert Kennedy's memoir that, had he lived: "It was Senator Kennedy's intention to add a discussion of the basic ethical question involved: what, if any, circumstance or justification gives this government or any government the moral right to bring its people and possibly all people under the shadow of nuclear destruction?"<sup>2</sup> None of the memoirists of the Kennedy or Johnson eras seem to have confronted this question (which is most relevant to the subject of this seminar). It is not easy to guess just how Robert Kennedy would have answered it, if he had lived and changed a few years longer.

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<sup>1</sup>My own doubts on this score have grown steadily ever since: especially as research such as Graham Allison's has brought to light the remarkably high estimates among members of the ExCom of the risk of nuclear war, many in the neighborhood of 1/3. Even for the stakes as they saw them, it would seem culpably irresponsible to have pressed the course they did in the light of such expectations (which were not shared, rightly or wrongly, at lower levels).

I can agree with Acheson on one score (*Ibid.*, p. 46): "One should not play one's luck so far too often." But I thank God his gamble was not tried; nor can I share his contemptuous inference that Khrushchev's retreat--evidently in the face of similar expectations--showed "befuddlement," "loss of nerve," a "maudlin" reaction ("He went to pieces when the military confrontation seemed inevitable. But he need not have done so.") (on the other hand, if I did share Acheson's disappointed appraisal, I would worry even more than I do about the reliability of Acheson's earlier "trained lawyer's analysis" of the low risks of a surprise attack on the missiles, since it presumed that Khrushchev's response would have been coolly and rationally restrained.

<sup>2</sup>Op. cit., p. 128.



The points to be made here are simply that circumstances surrounding Cuba II did make it likely that political support would be forthcoming for locally-decisive violent action; that this support was exhibited, during a non-violent phase of threats and preparations, underpinning these threats and indicating that political support would be maintained, at least for some period, if the threats failed and violent action were necessary; and that therefore, the threats were effective.

None of this could be expected with respect to the Rolling Thunder strategy against North Vietnam. Nor did U.S. officials expect it.

Why did they not start with such forceful but non-violent pressures as a blockade of Haiphong and Cambodia? In part, because this would not be even as decisive as the blockade of Cuba. But more (since it would, nevertheless, have been "pressure") because it would have raised immediately risks of direct conflict with Russia or China (and complaints from our allies). And neither the U.S. public nor the officials themselves really thought that this issue was worth that: at least, if it could possibly be avoided.

Why not seek Congressional support, a Resolution or debate, directly on the larger issues of the war and the bombing strategy; rather than misleadingly, on the essentially phony issue (or occasion) of "protecting U.S. combat units"? Why not at least seek the support of Congressional leadership, at the last moment before launching the strikes (as in Cuba II)? Because it was most unlikely that such support would be forthcoming, early or late: at least, without simultaneously demonstrating great doubts and division.

Why, throughout 1964-65, were precise demands never spelled out to the Hanoi leadership or the VS, either publicly or privately? Internal analyses in the Government did list such specific hopes as DRV removal of cadres, regrouped units; the ending of radio communications to the VC; ending of in-

infiltration and supply; public Bay directives to the VC to lay down their arms. Why were no such proposals communicated precisely?

In part because, in contrast to Cuba II, our coercive means did not include the capability to enforce such results unilaterally. We could punish Vietnamese in North and South; and we could, with U.S. troops, block VC total victory in the cities of South Vietnam. But two things we could not do (the very two we could do, physically, in Cuba, where the offending items were missiles, not people, brought in by sea): stop all infiltration from North to South, or eliminate the Communist organization in North or South.

Nor were our officials sure that Hanoi could be brought to do these things by any pressures; not united on how much it would be worth to try. For a number of advisors, it did not seem prudent to commit the U.S. even privately, much less publicly, to demands they might well want to compromise later. (Public demands would also have created public pressures for monitoring and enforcement procedures, another area where "tacit compromise" might prove desirable). Thus, the "progressive squeeze-and-talk" option attracted support from a diverse coalition of advisors in late '64 in part precisely because it did not specify just what the "talk" would be about, or when it would start, or end.

The results of all these considerations, in 1964: threats and demonstrative actions that were vague and contradictory; an overall pattern ambiguous with respect to what was threatened, what was demanded, and the likelihood that any pressure at all would be carried out.

The year started with public statements by both President Johnson and Secretary Rusk in February that "those engaged in external direction and supply" of guerrillas in South Vietnam "would do well to be reminded and to



remember that this type of aggression is a deeply dangerous game."<sup>1</sup> During the summer the same warning was conveyed privately to the Hanoi leadership. Yet during the year, while infiltration grew, ARVN suffered setbacks and politics grew ever more unstable in Saigon, no U.S. action resulted. There was, to be sure, the Tonkin Gulf "reprisal"; but that was carefully (even tendentiously) related to attacks on Americans, not to supply of guerrillas; and even this restricted criterion for retaliation was called into question when attacks on U.S. planes at Bien Hoa and on the Brink's BOQ brought no response.

Well, there was a reason for all this non-action:<sup>2</sup> the election.

Precisely.

It was perfectly obvious that the mood of the electorate promised the greatest possible majority (the largest in history, in fact) to a campaign platform opposing Goldwater's advocacy of various recklessnesses, including bombing. The credibility of warnings to Hanoi had to yield to the political benefits of implied promises not to send American boys or even planes to fight in Southeast Asia.

Reportedly Johnson regrets, now, that he may have given Hanoi (along with the U.S. electorate) a "misleading signal" about his own real intentions and determination in the campaign of '64. Probably he did not. But that was not what they would mainly watch for. The signal they probably caught--and they were not wrong--was that it was politically rewarding for him in 1964 to imply to the public he was not leading them toward a large war in Asia. They

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<sup>1</sup>Department of State Bulletin, March 16, 1954.

<sup>2</sup>Aside from the fact, unnoticed by most high-level advisors, that the coercive bombing strategy was a rotten idea.



knew they could assure him a large, long war, if he chose to start one at all.

They may or may not have foreseen the precise impact of the resulting "credibility gap." But the mood of the public, foretold by Johnson's <sup>choice of</sup> tactics and confirmed by his success, could only reassure them on the ultimate outcome: or at the very least, on the relative merits of holding on under pressure and prolonging the war, while raising its costs for America.

The reasons why it was hard for the Johnson Administration to send a clear and strong coercive message were undoubtedly evident to them, and they could expect them to inhibit the escalation process itself, as well.

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These reasons for failing to express precise demands or threats or to foretell unequivocally in word or deed the carrying out of threats, of course, had nothing to do with unfamiliarity with the works of Kahn and Schelling. They reflected reservations and divisions about the conflict within and among officials, but much more, within the public. And these, in turn, reflected the simple facts of the situation, plus the fact that, as seen (quite reasonably) by the public, not one of the characteristics of the Cuba II confrontation, listed earlier, applied in Vietnam. It was not that the American people, in just two years, had turned "soft" or apathetic. There was just no way to convince the great majority of the public, over a prolonged period, that the issues and stakes in Vietnam were equivalent to those posed by Cuba II or Berlin.

This did not preclude a massive, prolonged conflict, given the unwillingness of the American public to "lose" a violent contest, once started. Nor did it preclude willingness or even pressure from part of the public and Congress to accept utmost violence and risk in pursuit of victory, once frustration had

built up. But that would be countered by intense opposition from another part of an increasingly-polarized public, if not by prudence and scruples in the minds of high-level policy-makers themselves.<sup>1</sup>

There were other inhibitions, as well, on the actual escalation process that had already showed up clearly in 1964 as inhibitions on the "signalling" process. Instability of the GVN: fear that heavy pressure on North Vietnam might cause reprisals in the South that would crack ARVN or the GVN. Pressure by hawks in the U.S. (if encouraged too much or too soon by publicly adopting their view of the challenge and military possibilities) for a war effort in the South that would destroy the Great Society budget, or for attacks in the North that would risk general war with Russia or China and cause revulsion destroying the cohesion of our alliances and domestic society. Even tactical considerations: with so few rewarding targets to threaten in North Vietnam, one could be pressed into "destroying the hostages" too soon, earlier than Hanoi's hopes of winning in the South could be frustrated.

All of these did operate once the bombing started. Hanoi and Haiphong (in contrast, say, to Pyongyang) were not destroyed, nor was Haiphong mined. The dikes were not destroyed. There was no mobilization of U.S. reserves, hence no invasion of North Vietnam. Till 1970, neither Cambodia nor Laos were invaded. No nuclear weapons were used, or threatened.

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<sup>1</sup>I have always suspected that one reason why the recommendations of the JCS for unrestricted bombing of North Vietnam were never followed--quite apart from fear of Communist China or Russia, or even of public reaction--was that President Johnson and his main advisors did not personally feel justified in doing to the cities, towns and population of North Vietnam what we had done to Germany, Japan, or even North Korea. Perhaps I am wrong, in guessing they did not feel it would be right, or that they had a right, to do this. A hypothetical test would be to speculate what might have happened to the North Vietnamese if all news of their fate could have reliably been suppressed.



Intelligence analyses had indicated only two ways in which pressure on North Vietnam might bring the kind of concessions U.S. officials had (privately) in mind. First, a high likelihood, or the experience, of the extreme measures mentioned above, for a sustained period. Second, lesser pressures on the North (of the sort actually carried out) combined with the certainty of being blocked from victory by U.S. presence in the South for an indefinite period.

But from a coercive point of view, it was virtually impossible to convince the Hanoi leaders either that the U.S. could <sup>keep up</sup> ~~sustain~~ maximally brutal attacks upon their population, <sup>indefinite</sup> (even though the U.S. President could undoubtedly commence such a program) <sup>for a prolonged period</sup> or that the U.S. could certainly bear the costs <sup>Hanoi and the NLF</sup> they were capable of imposing in North and South indefinitely. And that was not because they were blinded by ignorance or ideology, but because they were not blind to realities of U.S. politics.

Moreover, they knew one thing that U.S. intelligence analysts were not able to teach their superiors, who--almost totally ignorant of their opponents and the history of the conflict--had to learn it from experience: that there was essentially no chance that they, the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party in Hanoi would cave in, or lose control, or even make significant concessions in what was, for their Party and themselves, a vital struggle, in response to bombing of the sort the U.S. did conduct, let alone to less, or to mere threats of more, or to the temporary presence of massive U.S. forces in the South. So U.S. politics would have time to become relevant.

They could have been wrong about the ultimate restraints that U.S. politics implied in a prolonged war. They could yet be proved wrong. But, adver-



series worthy of Dean Acheson's respect<sup>1</sup>, they were not ones to "go to pieces" before a military confrontation with the U.S.; they could be counted on to "play it cool." For this contrast with Khrushchev in Cuba II, their countrymen paid.

The Cuban Missile Crisis, then, was a poor school for the conflict with North Vietnam and the Viet Cong. Would the strategic analysts have been better teachers to our statesmen?

No. Briefly, their analyses embody as premises or limitations nearly all of the peculiar characteristics of the Missile Crisis (as it is conventionally perceived) that make that crisis a misleading and over-simplified paradigm for most conflicts, including Vietnam. Conflicts are presented almost invariably as a duel, between the President and a personalized foe. Totally omitted are elements of structure, diversity and conflict within the opposing governments and societies. This includes not only the political considerations discussed above, but the bureaucratic aspects that have increasingly received attention from such analysts as Andrew Marshall, Richard Neustadt, Graham Allison and Morton Halperin.

Among results of this abstraction from bureaucracy and politics are (1) greatly over-simplified notions of the aims, objectives, interests, influencing diplomatic and military behavior on both sides (only a few of those bearing on the bombing of North Vietnam have been mentioned here); (2) greatly exaggerated confidence in the likelihood or possibility of sending clear, unambiguous "signals" to "an opponent," or to read <sup>correctly</sup> signal-like meaning in opposing military behavior. Moreover, in the light of U.S./Vietnam relations, the

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<sup>1</sup>In contrast, Acheson makes it clear, he would no sooner sit down to a serious crisis with Nikita Khrushchev again than play high-stakes poker with an hysterical woman.

scope and impact of simple ignorance of the adversaries (and allies; and countrymen) seems far underrated in these writings. All of this tends to make national "coercion" a grossly imprecise and uncertain process: and in failing, or partly succeeding, a far crueler and more dangerous one than these analyses hint.



Consider first the perception of the opponents. At the very beginning of his discussion of coercion--"The diplomacy of violence"--Schelling points out that: "To exploit a capacity for hurting and inflicting damage one needs to know what an adversary treasures and what scares him..."<sup>1</sup> Later, looking specifically at "the business the United States got into in North Vietnam" he remarks that it is in just such a process of "compellance" that it is "so important to know who is in charge on the other side, what he treasures, what he can do for us and how long it will take him..."<sup>2</sup>

As in nearly all abstract strategic analysis<sup>3</sup> the opponent here is personalized, singular. The question "who is in charge" is unwonted recognition that there is more than one person on the other side of the hill, but this is cancelled out by the implied assumption that one is "in charge," and that all that need be asked or known is what "he" treasures and fears. (There is, of course, a counterpart assumption that "our side" can also usefully be regarded as "one," or a coherent "us," as in the Walt Kelly/Pogo line, "We have met the enemy, and he is us.")

This is not just a manner of speaking; or if it is, it is one of those ways of speaking that tend to determine ways of thinking and seeing.

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<sup>1</sup>Op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>3</sup>Definitely including my own, such as lecture on blackmail cited earlier, or "The Crude Analysis of Strategic Choice," American Economic Review, May, 1963. (I cannot even claim that the word "crude" in the title referred, in my own mind, to this particular limitation.)



Ignoring the fact that "the opponent" is not a person at all encourages misplaced confidence in inferences as to "his" aims, values and interests based on personal empathy, "putting ourselves in his place." The natural risks of this process are compounded by an American tendency to ignore differences of culture and history, and in this case, by unusually widespread and thorough American ignorance of the background, personality or political role of any of the individuals we were confronting, from Vietnamese peasants or soldiers to Ho Chi Minh.

Sol Sanders, a journalist whose experience in Asia goes back to 1945, once exploded at my remark that a number of Washington decision-makers had thought of the target of the Rolling Thunder campaign as being the minds of the Central Committee in Hanoi. "Just how many of the people making those policies could name four members of the Central Committee?!" he asked.

In 1964-65, it is more than possible that the correct answer to that question for the "principals" in Washington, was: Not one. To these highest-level policy-makers preparing coercive war, it was not only the provincial VC that were "faceless" (in George Carver's phrase) but their own opposite numbers in Hanoi. (Contrast the contest with the Soviets in Cuba II. And there is no North Vietnamese ambassador at all in Washington, let alone a "Toli").

In the absence of knowledge (or curiosity), intuition was more than usually fallible. Many of those officials took seriously pronouncements by Walt Rostow that "Ho is no more the guerrilla fighter in the jungles, with nothing to lose; he is not at all willing to risk his proud, hard-

won industrial assets..." Likewise, assumptions that the Communist leaders, grown older, softer and more citified, would no longer be willing or able to go back to life in the jungle, if Hanoi were destroyed or North Vietnam threatened. Or that the prospect of Chinese intervention was an even more frightening deterrent than the American bombing or invasion that might call it forth (thus magnifying the deterrent threat of the latter).

These notions were not endorsed by experienced civilian intelligence analysts. Their generally good record of predicting North Vietnamese behavior and responses over the last twenty years (despite the extraordinarily limited academic expertise in this country) belies the otherwise-plausible notion that an adequate understanding of Vietnam was not available to American officials. Why high officials trusted their own intuitions so far, ignoring so consistently the judgments of the intelligence community (without even probing more deeply for the basis of those judgments) is a puzzle I have not seen fully explained. faint  
Cubert  
Cubert

These intuitions did not lead to high confidence that threats against industrial "hostages" would bring victory, either by themselves or in combination with efforts in the South. But even more limited hopes were exaggerated.

In the fall of 1964, there seems to have been consensus among the highest advisors that a bombing "squeeze," either in the "fast" or the "gradual" forms, would at least (and by itself) significantly improve bargaining strength and the outcome of negotiations. And all assumed (here intelligence, mistakenly, concurred) that the pressure of the bombing would lead to immediate and increasing activity by North Vietnam to start



"discussions," to get it stopped. (The consequences of this mistaken assumption were complex and important, but will not be discussed here). Some worried about this prospect of "premature" negotiations, others counted on it. All assumed that the U.S. would be able to enter negotiations when it wished, without any further public initiative, simply by responding to Communist Bloc (and perhaps allied and domestic) urgings and proposals.

Instead, the bombing appeared to preclude negotiations while it continued, at least in the short run. No evidence appeared to support the hopes of some that the bombing by itself would be at least a strong bargaining counter--"something we can give up." Thus, in mid-spring, hopes shifted to the longer-run impact of the bombing plus U.S. ground operations in South Vietnam. But here again, the reading of North Vietnamese aims and determination presumed, in effect, a low level of resolve on the part of leaders, or followers, or both. This was implied even by strong hopes (not to speak of confidence) that it would be enough to deny them victory for some prolonged period, while meanwhile causing them pain in the North, forcing them to "pay a price" for "what they were doing to their neighbors."

It was true, as various analyses pointed out, that up till 1965 the price of North Vietnamese intervention had been very low, a level of effort easy to sustain indefinitely. But to find this highly encouraging to U.S. intervention was to imagine that this low price was near the limit of what the Lao Dong leaders would pay (or in domestic political terms, could pay)



to further their ends in South Vietnam. It was to believe, or hope, that these ends were so unimportant, so far from "vital," or perhaps so illegitimate in their own eyes, that they would pursue them only so long as they could do so cheaply and with high expectations of short-term success. Make the struggle look costly or prolonged, and they will draw back: at least long enough to allow the GVN to breathe and grow strong, to allow the U.S. to make a very graceful, dignified departure. Such hopes could be held confidently only by those ignorant of the history of struggle of those leaders going back twenty to forty-five years.

Perhaps one reason some officials imagined North Vietnamese resolution to be fragile or malleable was that they believed their own propaganda. Years of publicizing such terms as "aggression," "subversion," "violation of treaties" to describe the DRV involvement in Southern Vietnam--terms tendentious and misleading at best, in the light of actual history--may have convinced them that the Lao Dong leadership probably suffered from guilty consciences (so far as "Commies," as State Department cables referred to them in Acheson's day, can be said to have consciences). Once their misdeeds were revealed, once we showed that we were no longer prepared to "tolerate" their wrongdoing, embarrassment would be added to fear to impel them to stop. And Ho could do this all the more easily because of his "tactical flexibility," as a cynical and pragmatic Bolshevik untrammelled by democratic pressures or idealistic concerns for the lives and faith of allies or subordinates.

JFK

The imagery that seems to underlie these notions is often that of the opponent as precocious, naughty child. Admonitions by Rusk that Hanoi must "stop doing what it is doing...they know what it is they are doing" had the

distinct ring of "hands above the covers, boys." Other phrases presented the bombing as rapping them on the knuckles, having caught them with their "hands in the cookie jar."

This implicit adult-child analogy shows through clearly in Schelling's language regarding coercive warfare: "The object is to make the enemy behave."<sup>1</sup>

A central problem with the use of coercive warfare against non-white "second- or third-rate adversaries" these days is that they just do not respond to a whiff of grape or a gunboat volley like the "wogs" of yesteryear. The failure of the Suez Campaign to topple Nasser, or the Bay of Pigs operation to lead to an uprising against Castro, are among examples of this trend. The coercive aims of the Rolling Thunder campaign in 1965 can well be seen in the classic mode of gunboat diplomacy. It was not even the first time Haiphong had been threatened by Western firepower. The outbreak of major hostilities in the First Indochina War can be said to have commenced on November 23, 1946, when the guns of the French cruiser Suffren opened fire on the Vietnamese sector of Haiphong, inflicting a minimum of 6,000 civilian deaths. The objective, in part, was "to bring the Viet Minh military command to a more reasonable frame of mind."<sup>2</sup> That, too, failed.

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<sup>1</sup>Op. cit., p. 173. Italics added. See also p. 186: "Furthermore, coercive warfare against Communist China, intended not to destroy the regime but to make the regime behave,..." This paragraph also contains the remarks: "It might indeed take nuclear weapons to shock the Chinese into an appreciation that we were serious;...What the United States was doing in North Vietnam in 1965 against a third-rate adversary, with conventional explosives carried by airplanes that were not designed for the purpose, it would probably attempt to do in China with low-yield nuclear weapons in airplanes that have not yet been designed for it." (Part of the author's point here is the distinction of China as a "second-rate enemy" in contrast to North Vietnam or the Soviet Union.)

<sup>2</sup>Donald Lancaster, The Emancipation of French Indochina (London, 1961), p.



As John McAlistar has pointed out, the political transformation of the "wogs" is indicated quantitatively by the fact that as early as June, 1946, 33,000 French troops in southern Vietnam, with 6,000 Vietnamese under their command, "could not do the job" in suppressing insurgency that 10,779 French troops and 16,218 local militia for all of Indochina "had done with ease in twice the area before the war."<sup>1</sup> And it is measured in the perspectives of a political leader who, *Ho Chi Minh prophesied* two months before the shelling of Haiphong, just after the failure of the Fontainebleau Conference where he had received the honors of a recognized Head of State, *prophesied*: "If it is necessary for us to fight we shall fight. You will kill ten of our men, but we will kill one of yours and it is you who will finish by wearing yourself out."<sup>2</sup>

To assume the irrelevance of this history was to be as patronizing toward the British and French as toward the Vietnamese. As Bill Moyers recalls the mood of "some people":

They had no doubts about the efficacy of American power of Vietnam; had it failed anywhere before? Ironically, these were civilians, by and large. Someone at a dinner party once suggested to one of them that it might take as long to rid Vietnam of guerrillas as it did Malaya. He arched an eyebrow and replied: "We are not the British." There was a confidence--it was never bragged about, it was just there--a residue, perhaps, of the confrontation over the missiles in Cuba--that when the chips were really down, the other people would fold."<sup>3</sup>

was this, after all, unreasonable? Ignoring all the presumptions of superior competence and morality, should not the vast difference from the British or French in potential U.S. firepower make a difference? If the Soviet Union, after all, could bend before the realities of American strength, why should the Vietnamese be slow to do the same?

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<sup>1</sup>John T. McAlistar, Jr., Viet Nam: The Origins of Revolution, (N.Y., 1969), p. 218.

<sup>2</sup>Ho Chi Minh to Jean Sainteny, September, 1946 (McAlistar, op.cit., p. 296)

<sup>3</sup>"Bill Moyers Talks About the War and LBJ," Who We Are, ed. Robert Manning and Michael Janeway, (Boston, 1969), p. 262.



Here again, the analogy with the Soviet Union as opponent is deceptive. And thus, strategic analysis of escalation and coercion such as Kahn's On Escalation, which is based almost entirely on the model of a vital contest with the Soviet Union, is irrelevant or seriously misleading as a guide to the problems of ~~coercing a much smaller opponent, on less vital issues.~~ <sup>issues vital to the US</sup>

First, an issue that is marginal, if important, to the interests of the United States can be absolutely vital to the opposing regime. Its leaders and people may be prepared to fight to the death, so that nothing short of the most brutal threats and actions, if that, can effectively coerce them.

Well, the U.S. does not lack the strength to carry out such threats; that seems so obvious it is hard to believe it could be necessary to carry them out. As Moyers puts it: "You keep raising your stakes because you don't see how that other fellow could possibly be a match for you; he must be bluffing."<sup>1</sup>

Confidence in this contest comes from the assumption that one can always double the bet: like a roulette player with unlimited funds, then, one "cannot lose." Yet precisely against a smaller opponent, we can find ourselves in the position of a player, using this strategy, who discovers after several lost wagers that there is a house limit on the maximum bet permitted.

Against the Soviet Union, even initially small disputes are conventionally regarded as posing such great risks to national power and survival as to legitimize the contemplation or use, if necessary, of unlimited forms of violence, with risk of retaliation the only restraint. In this context, analysts like

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 263.

Kahn can abstract from close examination of the ethical questions raised by the use of force.

It is just when risks are not inherently great for the U.S. that such other considerations come to the foreground as inhibitions. However "sentimental" and "emotional" Dean Acheson might think it, arguments like Robert Kennedy's in the Cuban Missile Crisis (referring to attacks that would involve large numbers of Cuban civilians) are likely, eventually, to be politically relevant:

With some trepidation, I argued that...whatever military reasons he and others could marshal, they were nevertheless, in the last analysis, advocating a surprise attack by a very large nation against a small one. This, I said, could not be undertaken by the U.S. if we were to maintain our moral position at home and around the globe. Our struggle against Communism throughout the world was far more than physical survival--it had as its essence our heritage and our ideals, and these we must not destroy.<sup>1</sup>

There was, it seems, no comparable voice within the Administration in the late fall of 1964 and early 1965. Even critics of our involvement may have persuaded themselves, like the others, that because they were rejecting the "sharp, sudden blow" urged by the JCS, they were not engaged in "advocating a surprise attack by a very large nation against a small one." This aspect was not missed by many foreigners, or by the American academic community. But it did not immediately stir a very broad-based protest within the U.S.

Even so, the ability of an American President to double the bet, to play table stakes poker with all our resources in view (all-out bombing, invasion, nuclear weapons), proved soon to be limited. And in failing to fold, in "play-

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<sup>1</sup>Kennedy, op. cit., pp. 38-39.



ing it cool" as Acheson would say, the aging leader in Hanoi (who had quoted the American Declaration of Independence in his own version, twenty years earlier) may have been betting more heavily on the strength of the American ideals of which Robert Kennedy spoke than were his counterparts in Washington.